

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ANN CLEEVES

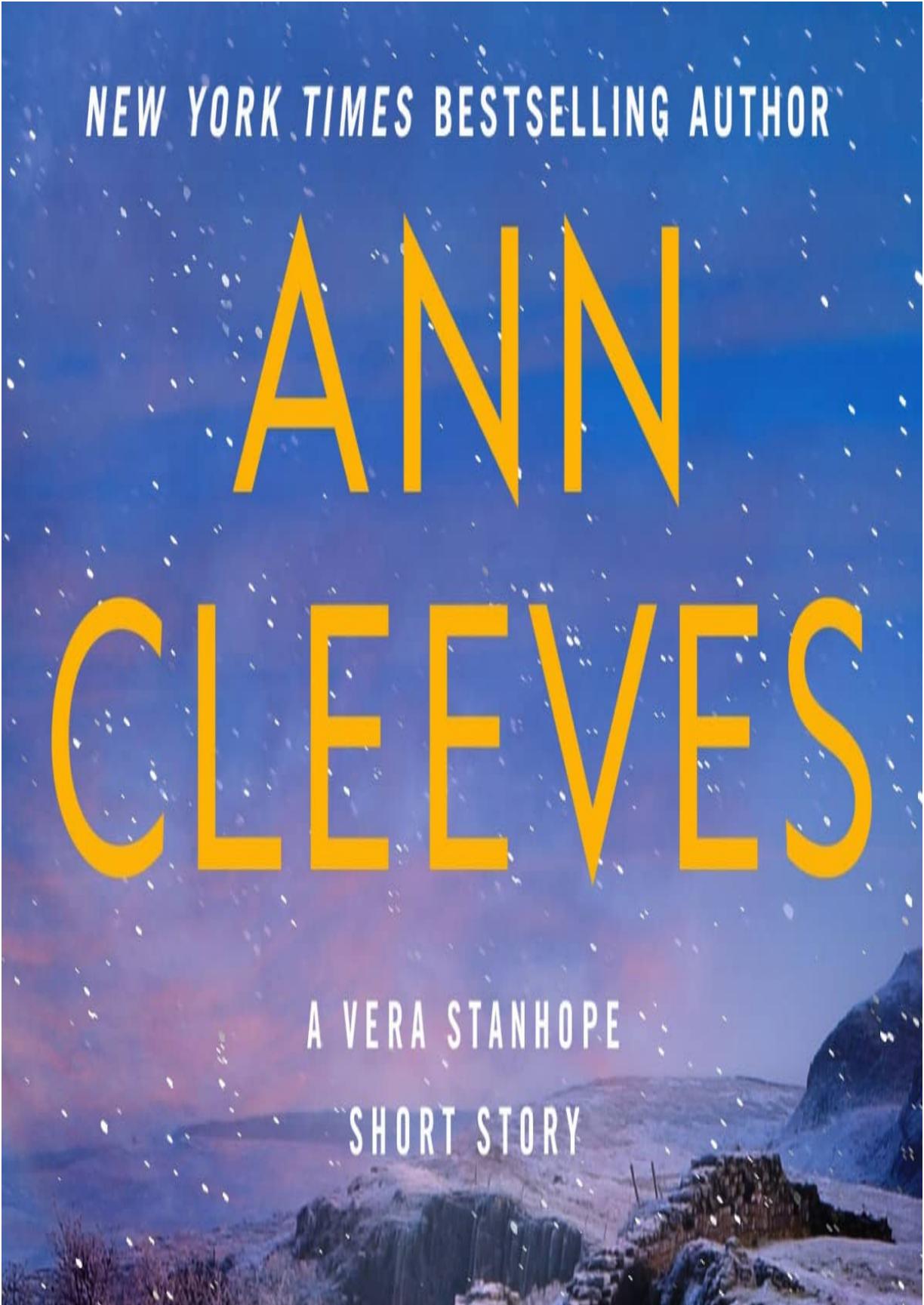
A VERA STANHOPE
SHORT STORY

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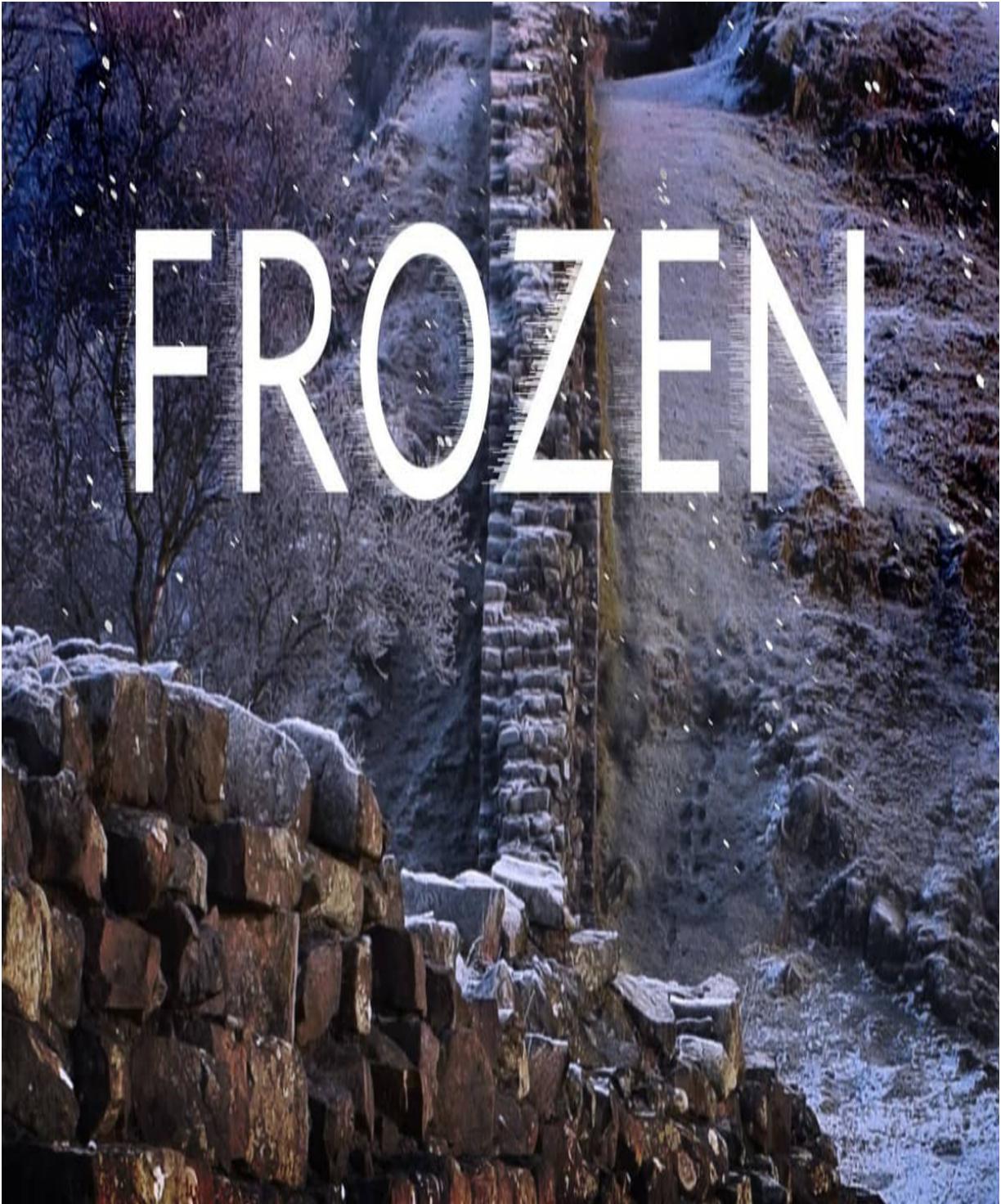
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Vera woke to a free day and an unexpected longing for exercise. The impulse must have come from the shard of winter sun that forced itself through her grubby bedroom window and from a week of being shut in the cupboard they called her office. She drove inland to Hadrian's Wall and walked for a mile or so along the Whin Sill ridge, feeling virtuous and exhilarated, the world, at least her world at her feet. The land spread each side below her: to the south, bare heather moorland running towards the Tyne Valley and the river that would flow through the city of Newcastle and on to the coast, to the north the forests of Kielder and Harwood and beyond them the Scottish border. This was her patch and she loved it.

Standing with her back to old stones, she imagined squads of legionnaires marching, fancied she could feel the ground shake with the rhythm of their feet. They must have policed the region then, so she saw them as her forbears, as kindred spirits, and felt a connection across the centuries. As a woman of course, she would never have been allowed any kind of responsibility, but she had a fleeting image of herself in a tunic and cloak, marching alongside them, bringing justice and order to this wild and lawless place. Then she threw back her head and laughed. She supposed the Romans would have had women to wait on them and provide them with comfort, but she'd be thought too old, too ugly and far too gobby even for that role.

Now the desire for fresh air and exercise had already passed. The connection had been broken. A craving for tea and cake had taken over. Vera walked back to her car and headed for the small town of Corbridge.

She parked in the square and found a cafe that smelled of strong coffee and fresh baking; here at least the reality lived up to the dream. Back in the street, replete and not ready to go home to the washing and cleaning that she'd planned for

the day, she wandered across to a bookshop. Forum Books. The name took her back again to the wall and the Romans. They would surely stock a title that would satisfy her curiosity about the soldiers who lived in the camps on the border. There might even be something about the place of women along Hadrian's Wall.

The place had once been a chapel. The ceiling was high and light shone through the arched windows onto pale wood shelves, filled with books. No stained glass and no elaborate carving. This had never been a place for show or pomp. By the entrance a table piled with books and a notice: Helen's Picks. Ahead of her the wooden pulpit remained, plain as a teacher's desk, on a small platform. Written on the wall above it: Read on ... There was the smell of paint and wood shaving. This was a new conversion. The building that had once been built to the glory of God, now celebrated the story in all its forms.

Just in front of the pulpit, it seemed the renovation work was continuing. A patch of flooring, the length of the platform, had been lifted and underneath there was wooden lid, a ring and a rope. Vera wandered over to look. The woman she took to be Helen had been supervising and she turned and grinned.

'Don't mind us. It's curiosity. We were told there was a baptismal font underneath, big enough for full adult immersion, and we wanted to see what was there. We thought we might make a feature of it.'

A skinny young man, who must work in the shop, started yanking on the rope and the huge hinged lid lifted slowly. At last it was raised far enough for him to grab one end and lower it back onto the floor to one side. A smell of damp and decay came with it. They looked down into a space that was much bigger and deeper than a grave. Rough stone steps led down to the void. And lying on the floor of the font was a skeleton. There were tatters of clothing, boots still intact, and where once the wrist had been, a bracelet of plaited

leather. It seemed to take a while for the owner of the shop and her assistant to realize what they were looking at, but Vera knew straight away.

'Please step away,' she said. 'And make sure no customers come through the door. I'm a police officer, a detective. We have to act as if this is a crime scene.'

Because she thought that even if the crime hadn't been committed here, the figure in the font was a victim of murder. Vera recognized the plaited bracelet. She'd never seen it, but she'd seen photos. This was Jenny Summerskill. She'd been fourteen when she'd gone missing, when she'd disappeared one beautiful summer's day on her way home from a school trip to Vindolanda, wearing her own customized version of the uniform, blue streaks in her hair and Doc Marten boots. And a bracelet made of plaited red leather. She'd haunted Vera since then.

That night Vera gathered her team around her in her house, the house where she'd grown up with Hector, her father. She'd been working on her day off so she didn't see why they shouldn't make the trek into the hills to make life a bit easier for her. Holly and Joe hadn't been part of the original investigation; it was ten years since Jenny had gone missing. Charlie had been around then though and Charlie had the memory of an elephant. She still had her unofficial notes, but Charlie would fill in all the gaps. She'd lit a fire. On the table under the window, there was a plate of Northumberland cheese and she'd picked up bread from the bakery in Corbridge before coming home. They couldn't say she didn't treat them well.

'Jenny Summerskill.' She paused and looked round to make sure they were all listening. A fire could make you sleepy and she needed their full attention. 'Fourteen years old, bright as a button and sharp as a knife. Given to independent thought, partly because of the way she was

brought up. She was the youngest of a big family, known locally as the raggle-taggle gypsies. They lived in a racketty former pele tower close to the wall. Mother was a shepherdess, two sisters were famous folk singers, brother a sculptor.' Vera paused again. She knew how to pace a story. She glanced at Charlie who knew what was coming. 'And a father known to us. A green activist, who's taken on fracking companies and developers, stood in front of his fair share of bulldozers and security guards.'

'Nothing illegal in that.' Holly might have stood in front of a few bulldozers herself. Before she joined the force of course.

'Ah, but his non-violent protest also involved releasing a load of animals from a lab in Newcastle and spray-painting slogans on Hadrian's Wall. Water soluble so it came off with the first rain, but it didn't make him popular with the archaeologists and academics.' Vera paused. 'Jenny was very much her father's daughter: bright, compassionate, impulsive.'

'When did the building stop being a chapel?' That was Holly again. She was the brainy one. Because that was the most important question, the one Vera had been asking since she'd found what was left of the girl.

'Ten years ago, at around the same time as Jenny went missing.'

'So, Jenny could have been lying in the font since she disappeared?'

'I suppose it's possible.'

'But nobody checked at the time the lass went missing?'

'Why would we?' Vera tried to curb her impatience. 'There was no connection between the chapel and the Summerskill family. None that we knew about.'

Silence.

Vera broke it first. 'The liaison officer who first worked with the family visited this afternoon to let them know we'd found a body. No confirmation yet but they know it's likely

to be their Jenny. I'm going first thing. Holly, you come with me. Joe, you keep on top of the forensics, get the CSIs moving. That poor lass who runs the bookshop won't want it closed in the weeks running up to Christmas. Charlie, get me a history of the building. What's happened to it since the chapel closed down. Dates and the contact details of all key-holders.' There were nods, another silence.

'Well, piss off home then,' Vera said. 'I don't know about you lot but I need my beauty sleep.'

There'd been a snow shower in the night, then the sky had cleared and there'd been a sharp frost. Vera had slept like a baby, but she'd lived in the hills long enough to understand border country weather. She'd arranged to meet Holly outside the Summerskill family home and when she arrived the woman's car was already there, pulled onto the curb, crushing the frozen grass.

The house hadn't changed much since Vera had last visited, parts probably hadn't changed much since the tower was first built hundreds of years before to protect against the Reivers, the border clans that had scrapped over every last bit of land. It had been extended later, so now it looked more like a fortified farmhouse, but the tower was still there, grey and brooding against a clear blue sky. The family were waiting for them. All the family, which was more than Vera had been expecting. She'd thought the younger members would have moved away, made a life of their own.

Vera stood outside for a moment and watched them. They were sitting at the kitchen table and looked much as they had when she'd first visited. The offspring looked older now, real adults rather than unformed young people, but the parents were much the same - they'd always been gaunt, tough, lined by time spent in the wind and the sun. She tapped on the door and went in, followed by Holly.

The range was lit but the kitchen wasn't warm; cold

penetrated through the ill-fitting windows. These were hardy souls.

'Is it her?' Jan, the mother, spoke the moment they went in. 'Have you found her at last?' She got up and pushed a huge kettle onto the hot plate. It hadn't long boiled because it started hissing immediately.

'I think it is.' Vera could sense Holly's disapproval. They should wait until there was a formal confirmation. 'She's still wearing the plaited leather bracelet. And the boots.'

'Can we see her?'

'Eh pet, there's not much to see.' She took a seat at the head of the table and looked around. Holly leaned against the wall, still standing. She'd be making notes as they went along. Jan sat opposite, next to George, her husband. On one side of the table were Alice and Daisy, not twins but looking so similar that they could be. Vera did the simple sums in her head; they'd be twenty-seven and twenty-eight now, in their late teens then, but already famous if you were into folk music. On the other side of the table, quiet and brooding, the brother Matt. He'd been the oldest, artist and sculptor. Surely some of them should have partners, kids even?

'Are you all still living at home?' Making it a question, not a judgement.

But Matt's one word came out as a challenge. 'Aye.' So? What is it to you?

'We never closed the case,' Vera said. 'You know that. But this is new evidence and we'll be starting from scratch. There'll be more questions.'

'She was here all the time.' Jan seemed not to have heard. 'A stone's throw from home.'

'Maybe not all the time,' Vera said. 'That still has to be established. 'Did you have anything to do with the chapel? When it was still a place of worship?'

'We sang there a few times,' Alice, statuesque, copper-haired and creamy skinned, 'when we were starting out.'

Jenny was a friend of the minister's son. The acoustics are fab and we used it for practice. Then he hosted an evening for us. Our first gig.'

'What was his name?'

'The minister? Elliott. Neil Elliott.' This was Daisy, a slighter, less substantial version of her sister.

'What was he like, this Neil Elliott?'

'Not what the congregation were used to.' Alice allowed a touch of humour into her voice. 'A happy-clappy evangelical, who wanted to attract kids into the place. Always a bit hyper - you'd have said he'd been on the communion wine, but they don't drink, do they, those Presbyterians? A wife who worked away a lot and certainly wasn't into good works or tea at the Manse. The old ladies disapproved big style.'

'You must have told us about the son at the time.' Vera kept her voice calm and even. 'We asked about all Jenny's pals. I don't remember a minister's son though.'

'Thomas.' George spoke from the other end of the table. 'That's right isn't it? He was called Thomas. He was on the list of friends we gave you. We probably didn't mention his father's profession.'

'And where are they now, these Elliots?'

'They must have moved away when the chapel closed down. We don't hear much Corbridge news, not up here by the wall.' Jan was dismissive. The kettle was boiling but she seemed not to hear. There was no offer of a drink. The whole family was waiting for the officers to go.

When they left the Summerskill house it was snowing again. Proper snow this time, blown into whirls, the sky the lightest grey. Vera stood for a moment and sniffed the air. 'I'm going straight home. If I go to the station I'll never get back. This could go on for days.' She looked at Holly. 'Do you want to come too? I've got a spare room if you have to end up

staying. And we have good broadband now. Jack and Joanna sorted it out.' Jack and Joanna were her neighbours, ageing hippies, and the kindest people she knew.

Vera watched Holly's face, saw an initial horror at the prospect of spending the night somewhere so chaotic and unhygienic replaced by the possibility of playing an important role in solving the crime. Holly was ambitious. She nodded. 'OK. That makes sense. I wouldn't want to try getting back to Kimmerston in this.'

'You go ahead,' Vera said. 'The Land Rover will make it up the hill for a while yet, but your car will struggle in half an hour or so. I'll sweep into Corbridge and pick up some supplies.' Bread, milk, whisky. Something green because Holly is a health freak. 'Light a fire. There's a spare key under the pot on the windowsill.'

Another wince of horror at Vera's lack of security and Holly was gone.

Vera parked in the square in the middle of Corbridge and saw Helen, the bookshop owner and her lanky assistant, wrapped in big coats, watching from the edge of the cordon. The woman called out to Vera as she walked past on her way to the butcher's.

'Any idea when we can get back inside? We've got our opening event tomorrow. Christmas readings and music. Completely sold out.'

Vera crossed the square to join them. 'I've no idea, pet, but I'd work on the assumption that you need to find a new venue.' She paused. 'Were you around ten years ago when Jenny Summerskill went missing?'

'We moved down from Scotland a year ago and we've been working on the chapel ever since. Doing bits of part time work to keep a roof over our heads. You know how it is ... It's always been a dream, running a bookshop, but it's been a struggle.' She nodded to the young man beside her. 'This is my son. A degree in Fine Art but at the moment jobbing labourer and shop assistant. I'd never have got the

place open without him.' She put her arm around his shoulder and hugged him to her. He pulled a face.

'Do you know the Summerskills?'

Helen gave a little laugh. 'I know of them. They're legends. So talented, all of them. And there are more stories about the daughter's disappearance than you'd believe.'

'What's the consensus?' The snow was still falling, but despite her cold feet, Vera was interested.

'That her father drove her away. He's an awkward character. Angry. And they never got on. But it seems they were wrong, doesn't it? So much hurtful gossip and she was dead all the time.'

When Vera got home, Holly was still struggling to get a fire going; certainly, it was giving out no heat. The wind had blown the snow into banks on the outside window ledges, so inside it was already dark as evening. Vera wondered what the soldiers from Rome, used to sunshine, good wine and olives would have made of these wild lands. She thought of the Summerskills in the house tucked under the wall, grieving all over again for their lost daughter.

'You make a start on checking out the minister and his lad. Neil and Thomas Elliott. Let's see if either of them is known to us these days. It's some coincidence that they knew Jenny and her body turned up where Elliott was working. I'll get some heat in the place and make a brew.'

Vera soon had a blaze going in the hearth; she had the knack, but also the firelighters she'd forgotten to mention to Holly. When she came back from the kitchen, Holly was sitting with her laptop on her knee.

'Anything?' Vera handed over a mug of tea.

'Yeah.' Holly looked up. 'Not sure how useful it is. When the chapel in Corbridge closed Neil Elliott moved on to be group minister of a rural circuit in the borders. Then he moved again two years later to take over a city church.'

Vera wondered if that was itchy feet or his particular brand of ministry hadn't gone down well in the country.

'Where is he now?'

Holly looked up from the laptop. 'He died three years ago.'

'Murder? Suicide? Ill-health?'

'Accident. His car crashed when he was coming home from a church meeting one night. The weather was awful. A bit like this. He left a wife and a couple of kids.'

'Including Thomas, friend of Jenny Summerskill. Have you dug up anything about him?'

'Nothing showing yet.'

Vera looked outside. It was still snowing, the flakes big and white against the grey sky. She was thinking about the other family in the case: the raggle-taggle gypsies. She'd never had George Summerskill down as an angry man. Passionate about his various causes and given to publicity stunts, but rather a gentle soul, she'd always thought. If she'd got that wrong and George had upset Jenny as much as Helen the bookseller had implied, Vera would have to start looking at the case again. She wished she could go back to the house by the Wall with its tower and its fierce, close family, see them again with the new perspective. But she knew she'd never get there until the weather changed, even in the Land Rover. She turned back into the room.

'Leave the Elliotts for a moment. Can you dig out all you can on the Summerskill family? What's been going on in the last ten years? They seem frozen in time there. They've all got older but nothing has changed. I wonder if they knew what happened to their daughter all the time and they're held together by a shared guilt.'

'Maybe,' Holly looked up from the laptop. 'But wouldn't a shared grief do that to you too?'

Vera ignored that; she didn't like being questioned. 'Can you find out if George has been in trouble since Jenny disappeared?'

'Sure.'

Vera drank tea and stared into the fire. While Holly was

working her magic on the internet, she was recreating the day of Jenny's disappearance. There'd been a minibus to take the kids to the Roman site, a guided tour round the fort and a talk by the archaeologist. The minibus had dropped the students in various locations on the way back. Why take them back to the high school in Hexham, the distraught headteacher had said after Jenny's disappearance, when they'd just have to travel home? The parents had all agreed to the arrangement. Jenny had been dropped off with a group of others, but had wandered off on her own. Vera had talked to the youngsters to find out why, but they'd just shrugged, implying that was the way Jenny was. She did her own thing. Ploughed her own furrow. The last time they'd seen her she was walking up the lane towards the family home.

Vera got to her feet, felt the strain on her knees and thought, very briefly, that perhaps she should try to lose weight again. Her Summerskill witness statements were in a file on the table. Holly was still working at the computer. It was quite dark now. Bleak mid-winter. The time of year when Jenny had gone missing, so it would have been almost dark then too, as she'd walked off alone. Vera checked through the file. Thomas Elliott had been one of Jenny's group and he'd talked to the police.

I offered to walk with her but she said she'd be OK. I thought her Dad or her brother Matt would be coming to pick her up.

Vera turned to Holly. 'Anything?'

'No. Jenny's father seems to have become a reformed character. No court appearances and no mention in the media at all.'

'Check out the brother too, will you? Matthew the famous sculptor.' But Vera was thinking about Jenny again and the way her friends and teachers had described her: brave, confident and fiery, confident beyond her years. It wouldn't have scared her to walk home alone in the dark.

Holly starting talking about Matthew's achievements: the exhibition at the Baltic, the commission by the Hepworth Gallery. His most famous work was a bronze of a young female Briton that stood outside on a mound to the north of the Wall. Vera nodded occasionally to show she was interested and then she turned back to the file. She couldn't find anything about George or Matthew driving to fetch Jenny. The girl had been reported missing later that evening when she didn't turn up at home.

That night Holly slept in the room that had once belonged to Vera. Vera made a show of supplying clean sheets and a pile of blankets. The next morning, she woke first and had coffee in the pot and toast ready buttered when Holly came into the kitchen.

'Jack's cleared the track, so you can escape as soon as you like. Get back to Kimmerston and let them know they way our minds are working.'

Holly shot Vera a glance to show she didn't have a clue which way her boss's mind worked, but she knew better than to speak.

In Corbridge, Helen had taken Vera's advice and the bookshop's event had been moved to the cafe on the square. They'd turned it into a coffee and cake session instead of an evening meeting because more snow was forecast for later in the day. Forum books was still surrounded by police tape and a uniformed officer stood on the door. The cafe was packed and Vera slipped in and found a place at the back. When she arrived, the proceedings were coming to an end. The primary school choir sang the Coventry Carol and Vera was pleased Joe wasn't there. He was so soppy that he'd have been crying after the first verse. She waited until the crowd had thinned and found Helen and her son on their own at a table in the corner.

'Is there any news? Can we move back into the chapel?
We need the Christmas business if we're going to survive.'

Vera looked at her for a moment before asking the question that had been troubling her since the evening before. 'What brought you back?'

Helen shut her eyes and there was another silence. 'Thomas follows the Summerskill girls on Facebook. He could see how affected they still were by Jenny's disappearance, how they still allowed themselves to believe that she might still be alive. He thought we should let them know, give them some peace.'

'Hence the charade, the pretence to discover the body.
Did you know I was in town?'

Helen shook her head. 'Any customer would have done.
Someone to be a witness.'

'Didn't anyone recognize you when you moved in? You'd been the minister's wife.'

'Oh, I looked quite different then.' Helen gave a little smile. 'I worked in finance, dressed the part. And I wasn't around much anyway. When Neil got the post here, the deal was that I led my own life. Perhaps that was why I didn't see what was going on.'

'And what was going on?'

'He was drinking. Hard. He hid it very well. Not even the kids, who were closer to him than I was, knew. I think it was Neil's way of surviving the disappointment and the criticism. He arrived here with so much passion, so many ideas and the congregation ripped him apart. They were very genteel of course, the respectable elderly of Corbridge, but they killed his confidence, bit by bit.'

'Had he been drinking the afternoon Jenny died?'

Helen nodded. 'Neil decided he'd come to pick up Thomas from the minibus after the school trip, but he was driving too fast. It was nearly dark and the road was icy. He didn't see Jenny until it was too late, then when he braked he slid into her. She died immediately.'

Vera wasn't sure how a man as pissed as Neil Elliott had been could tell that. A 999 call might have saved the girl. 'What did he do then?'

Helen looked straight at Vera. 'A terrible thing. He rolled her into the ditch, picked up Thomas and took him home, and then went back for her.'

'And all the time Jenny's family were searching for her, frozen in their grief, she was lying in the font in his chapel.'

Helen nodded. 'There was one last service before we left. Then the chapel was empty until I bought it.'

'When did you know that Jenny was here?'

'Not then!' Helen was desperate for Vera to believe her. 'Neil confessed later to us after we'd left Corbridge. He promised he'd stop drinking. We moved to the city for a fresh start. I gave up work, thinking I could save him.' A pause. 'But he was the only person who could do that.' She stared out onto the snowy square. 'And in the end, his drinking killed him. At least he didn't take anyone else with him that time.'

'Jenny loved books.' Thomas Elliott spoke for the first time. 'She was full of stories. Words spilled out of her. I thought it would be a memorial to her, the shop.' He'd started to cry.

Outside the snow had started again, blown by a wind from the north. Vera was thinking of the family whose lives had stopped abruptly with Jenny's death. Who were stranded in time like one of Matthew's sculptures. She hoped they'd be able to move on now, that they'd be able to cry for Jenny too.

About the Author



David Hirst

[ANN CLEEVES](#) is the multimillion copy and *New York Times* bestselling author behind two hit television series—the BBC's *Shetland*, starring Douglas Henshall, and ITV's *Vera*, starring Academy Award nominee Brenda Blethyn—both of which are watched and loved in the U.S. *The Long Call*, the first in the Two Rivers series introducing Detective Matthew Venn, was an instant *New York Times* bestseller.

Shetland is available in the U.S. on Netflix, Amazon Video, Britbox, and PBS, and *Vera* is available on Amazon Video, BritBox, and PBS.

The first Shetland novel, *Raven Black*, won the CWA Gold Dagger for best crime novel, and Ann was awarded the CWA Diamond Dagger in 2017. She lives in the U.K. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).



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www.minotaurbooks.com

The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.

Cover design by David Baldeosingh Rotstein Cover photographs: Hadrian's wall
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ISBN 978-1-250-80071-8 (ebook)

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Originally published in Great Britain by Macmillan, an imprint of Pan Macmillan

First U.S. Edition: 2020

First eBook edition: 2020